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The Interpretation of the Ceremony

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Another interesting feature of the emblem mechanism is that it provides a fixed form, a model and a song with the possibility of multiple meanings in this case. It is in the nature of symbols, whether they occur in dreams, speech or action, to become the centre of a cluster of different associations. The efficacy of ritual as a social mechanism depends on this very phenomenon of central and peripheral meanings and on their allusive and evocative powers. It makes possible interpretations that vary with the age, the knowledge and even the temperament of individual performers. The essential fact about the *mbusa* is not their exact meaning but the fact that they are what they are—'things handed down'—Hence they act as signs that things will go on as they have gone on, and that powers given to mankind before will be given to them again. They are used as the basis of rites of charter maintenance.[1] I have pointed out that one of the striking aspects of the chisungu I witnessed was the insistence that the designs should be modelled exactly, even though the work involved hours of tedious labour. This was so even in the case of the pottery snakes and other symbols made in clay on the floor of the initiation hut, which were destroyed on the evening of the day on which they were made. This insistence on exact detail in, for instance, the spacing of the beans and pumpkin seeds that decorated the emblems, was combined with a variety of explanations of the symbols used. The interpretation of the songs given in the appendices show that there is in every case at least one double meaning for each symbol. The hoe represents the woman's gardening duties but it also represents the husband who makes his wife fertile. The miming dances round the *musuku* tree are done 'to honour the *musuku*', the women's tree, and women said that if they failed to do these actions there would be no parenthood. But there was also a reference to the woman's duty to get firewood now that she was married. Another set of ideas centred round the blessing of the girls' emblems that were tied to the tree and handled with the women's mouths. 'We bless them with our spittle.' Here a variety of meanings is loosely associated: the tree that bears much fruit and hence symbolizes fertility, the tree that provides wood used for firewood, the honouring of the tree with spittle by which the

[1] I give the term charter the meaning that Malinowski did.

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ancestors' blessings are conveyed. Another example is that of the tortoise who breaks the habits of a lifetime, not only by climbing trees but by climbing them backwards as the girls are asked to do. The mime represents the unusual thing, the woman who is ready to do her husband's work if he is away and other difficult or almost impossible tasks. She is also to be like the tortoise who puts his head under his shell, in that she is to keep silent about her relations with her husband. But she is also taught that she is not to be like the tortoise who puts his head out looking for food when he is in other people's houses, but keeps his head inhospitably in when he is in his own house—in other words does not tell his guests he has supplies of food. (Appendix B, No. 50.) Such interpretations show how the same symbol can at one and the same time represent the thing that must be done, and the thing that must not be done.

As in dream life the symbols of the chisungu evoke a variety of linked associations, verbal and other. The salt, the firewood, or the curious figurines stand for certain emotional associations common to the whole community, but they may also acquire special meanings in the light of that particular ceremony, or even in terms of individual experience. The 'secret' meanings of the *mbusa* were, as we saw, gradually learnt by the more intelligent women through a series of subsequent repetitions, questions, answers and guesses. But the more obvious interpretations of a representative rite could change with the times. For instance, the miming of the bridegroom as an old man with horns on his head was described by older women as a representation of a witch doctor who has charms for the fertility of women; but a young girl explained the matter in practical terms as showing that it is 'sensible to marry an old man nowadays since he will not go away to the mines and leave you stranded'.

All symbolic objects make it possible to combine fixity of form with multiple meanings, of which some are standardized and some highly individual. Long and complex ritual of the chisungu type inevitably represents a cluster of ideas, understood, half-understood or merely felt. Mimetic rites or the use of designs or figurines are an admirable mechanism for conveying such associated notions, and moral concepts.

A legal contract of marriage defines the behaviour expected of

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man, where it would be found sticking upright on the mound in the morning full of grave-earth, and hence the injured spirit of the dead.

Some of the other objects the natives condemned in spite of all evidence of common sense, so much had they made up their minds already as to the horrors they expected to find. The parietal bone of a monkey recently shot in a garden raid was sworn to be that of a baby. The skull of a vulture with its characteristic beak was identified as an owl by natives who are good naturalists, since sorcerers are known to prowl at night with owl-like birds (*ntitimusi*) to steal grain from the granaries of others. A polished bit of wood was dubbed the wrist-bone of a lion by one of the best-known hunters in the district. Lastly, the two horns which raised the greatest outcry were *fimango*, or horns specially prepared by the *nganga* of a chief in old days to lay the spirits of sorcerers burnt after death by the *mwafi* poison ordeal; that is to say, horns which are specially made to protect people against witchcraft. These objects, filled with medicines to attract evil spirits, the ends netted in and covered with red dye and black beads for the same purpose, acted, as it were, as lightning conductors, kept outside a chief's village to attract the evil spirits to the ground. *Fimango* were also used in the most important form of divination known as '*kutinta*' practised by the *nganga* of the chief. The main protection of the native against witchcraft in the old days was therefore cheerfully discarded on the heap at the bidding of a couple of quacks! In fact the *Bamucapi* depended a good deal for their effects on the ignorance of the young of the use of Bemba magic. Their own ignorance on the subject, and their lack of knowledge of the language, was of no account, since they defended the throwing away of a charm admittedly harmless by declaring it contained a *cifimba* unseen to the ordinary man.

Our examination of a typical heap of horns has therefore shown us that only 11 out of 135 horns were admitted by every one to be undeniably bad destructive magic, that is to say, prepared for the injury of others. For the rest, 2 were actually protective magic intended to save the whole community against witchcraft, while the majority were containers of medicine, some curative, and some mere charms for success, dangerous only in so far as success could be considered to be obtained at the expense of others. It would appear thus to be part of the skill of the *Bamucapi* to create the sense of danger from which they